

"Reconstructing Afghanistan: Freedom In Crisis": Amb. Zalmay Khalilzad Testimony

January 29, 2003

Copyright 2003 WPPI.com

AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD: Thank you very much. It's a great pleasure and honor for me to be here and to see such a distinguished group of Americans and Afghans.

I would like to commend the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom and The George Washington University Law School for organizing this conference and to thank Felice Gaer, Chair of the Commission, Dean Michael Young of the law school, Ambassador at Large for Religious Freedom John Hanford, and my friend Ishaq Shahryar, the Ambassador of Afghanistan to the United States.

I also would like to welcome the many distinguished Afghan friends that I see who have traveled here from Afghanistan. It's good to see all of you here.

Over the past year and a half, we, and the Afghan people, have seen great changes, some great accomplishments, but continue to face great challenges. One challenge that we face today is reflected in one of the titles that I hold, Ambassador at Large for Free Iraqis.

Since the President asked me to take on that responsibility last month, I have heard from some that there are questions about whether the United States will forget Afghanistan if we move forward on Iraq. I can authoritatively tell you that this will not happen. Our commitment to the future of

Afghanistan is unshakable. Iraq will not reduce that commitment.

As

President Bush told President Karzai yesterday during a telephone conversation, and repeated it in the State of the Union last night, the United States is committed to the success of Afghanistan. In fact, I have a bit of news to report to you, that President Karzai will be visiting Washington on the 27th of February for meetings with President Bush in order to reinforce that commitment that the United States has for success in Afghanistan; for, as we have said repeatedly, Afghanistan's success is our success.

Afghanistan's failure

would be, God forbid should it happen, we don't anticipate it, we will do all that we can, and we are confident that we will succeed in Afghanistan.

What brought us to Afghanistan, you all know, was the terror attack against the United States on September 11th. The war against terror continues. This war has many fronts. The domestic level protecting the United States from attacks is an important priority. Abroad, the struggle against those who continue to support terrorism or who threaten the world with weapons of mass destruction also continues.

This also means, the continuing war against terror, weakening extremist movements and strengthening moderate and democratic forces by promoting economic prosperity around the globe and promoting political freedom.

Building a new order in

Afghanistan is one of those fronts. We know that building the economic, political and security institutions that Afghanistan needs will take time and will take resources. We will be with the people of Afghanistan for the time that it takes, and we will work with our allies and friends to continue to provide the resources necessary.

As

the President has said, the United States is not a conqueror, but a liberator. This is a reflection of our American values, but American foreign policy must be based on American interests and anchored, at its core, on American values. Supporting the development of Afghanistan reflects those values and interests.

Our vision for the future of Afghanistan is a shared vision, a vision we share with the people of Afghanistan. It's a vision of an Afghanistan that is a state free of terrorism and terrorists, not a threat to itself or others; an Afghanistan that is a free democratic society, where people enjoy the benefits of an increasingly prosperous market economy, a state that others point to as a model to aspire to, not a place to fear.

That is quite a vision for a place that was Afghanistan 14 months ago. Fourteen months ago, Afghanistan was a place that inspired fear, both abroad and at home. Afghans at home were afraid to do simple things, such as listen to music, to talk to their friends. Girls could not go publicly to school. Children in other countries were learning skills that moved them forward to new Information Age. Afghan children were learning little and falling behind.

Afghan women were perhaps the most oppressed in the world. Afghanistan was a place where those who preach hate and destruction were welcome, a place where terror lived and terrorist supporters ruled.

How far have we come during the past year? 2002, in my view, was a good year for Afghans. In Afghanistan, people now listen to music. Girls not only went back to school last March 22nd, but they are working feverishly to make up for lost time. A U.N. program for winter vacation catch-up studies has been flooded with girls, with the U.N. reporting that 15,000 girls are now registered for what started out as a program for 11,500 and more are signing up daily.

Throughout Afghanistan, when school reopened, planners were overwhelmed as over 3 million children came to school, over a million more than was forecasted. There is a hunger among Afghan children and their parents for learning. This makes me optimistic about the future of Afghanistan.

Afghans are seeking out information. Newspapers and radio stations are springing up around the country. Kabul's new press corps is learning fast to be an articulate part of political dialogue. I see it firsthand in tougher and tougher questions at my own press conferences when I visit Kabul.

Boundaries are being crossed, minds opened and past patterns changed. Not long ago a cartoonist was imprisoned by lower level officials for drawing a critical cartoon of President

Karzai. When the president learned of this, he immediately had the man released, telling people that he was prepared for open political debate.

When

a woman delegate to the Loya Jirga announced she would run for president, an unprecedented step in Afghanistan, her courage and determination were welcomed by many delegates. We saw in her determination to run for public office, a public rebuke of the oppression of women by the Taliban.

Of course, the legacies of the past will not be changed overnight, but we have seen great progress. Today, structures are being created, such as the Human Rights and Constitutional Commissions that will provide the framework for future progress.

The United States, through contributions of \$1 million to the Human Rights Commission and \$2.5 million to the operations of the Constitutional Commission, actively supports these new structures.

At the same time, our work and the work of the international community in building structures that allow the economy to begin to grow and that provide security are an inseparable part of the building of the structures that allow for the development of human rights. There is a mutually reinforcing relationship among these structures. Structures for economic progress and security help build and reinforce the structures that protect human rights.

Our

experience here in the United States and what we have seen repeatedly throughout the world is that the secure foundation of protection for human rights is a key in turn to successful and sustainable development. A country's future depends on each individual's ability to realize their potential.

Now, the Afghans are working to develop a constitutional framework for the future. They face difficulties similar in some ways to those the United States faced in 1789. But over 20 years of suffering make the Afghans uniquely aware of the importance of human rights and the need to protect them in this new Constitution.

Our role is to support this process, to aid

it, but to ensure that the choices made are Afghans' choices. As the President has said, it is also important for people to know we never seek to impose our culture and our form of government. We just want to live under those universal values, God-given values.

We believe in the demands of human dignity that apply in every culture, in every nation. Human beings should have the right to free speech. Women deserve respect and opportunity. All people deserve equal justice, religious tolerance. This is true in America, this is true in Afghanistan, these rights are true everywhere.

As the writers of the new Constitution proceed, and as the people of Afghanistan participate in the constitutional process, they will have to struggle with difficult issues, such as how to protect freedoms, how to define the scope and role of religion in political life, and how to ensure that a hijacked version of Islam, like the Taliban, does not come back to the fore again; how to balance the interests of the region and the need for a central government, and how to ensure women, ethnic, and religious minorities are protected.

These are issues which many countries have struggled with, but perhaps none while facing the magnitude of the challenges that Afghanistan faces. A constitution can set the foundation for great progress by creating a framework that enshrines basic universal values and individual rights. The United States Constitution reflected ideals that were particularly American, but also universal.

Our Constitution reflected our values, but also was informed by concepts of universal human rights and freedom developed by thinkers in England and France, going back to Rome, Greece and the Middle East.

Religious values are in the fabric of the United States. They were important to our Founding Fathers, as was the protection of those who practiced religion in different ways. Religious values are in the fabric of Afghanistan as well. Afghanistan has its own traditions, history and religious heritage.

Its 1964 Constitution was widely admired in the Islamic world, but 40 years of strife have reemphasized the need for a structure that can meet the needs of all Afghans. It is up to the Afghan people to develop their own distinctive political institutions, but the world and the United States have some lessons to offer, most importantly, the overriding

importance of protecting fundamental human rights.

In

Afghanistan, there are both Shiites and Sunnis, Ismaelitis, and many important Sufi movements, those who adhere to the Jafari school, and the Hanafi school. While there have been conflicts, there has been much tolerance among Afghans. Afghans have been hospitable to other beliefs. Before the Taliban, Kabul was a place where Hindus and Sikhs freely practiced their religion.

Religious differences and seeking

to gain advantage through policies can be a danger to society. The challenge for Afghanistan and Afghans is to find a path that allows for the development of civil society, freedom of expression, of religious practice and of political expression--a path that maximizes potential, human potential, and minimizes the possibility of new conflicts.

Afghanistan

needs judiciary and security structures that are servants of the people, not their oppressors. Such structures will help protect against the forces that are still there that want to pull Afghanistan back. For the United States, our role is to provide the appropriate assistance to achieve our shared vision, but to be conscious that these must be Afghan decisions, arrived at and agreed to by the Afghans. Our war is against terrorism. Our objective is a lasting peace. Our commitment is evident in our support for security, economic development and human rights. The United States' assistance this year for Afghanistan will reach over \$800 million.

While our troops continue the

struggle against terrorism, we are refocusing our military efforts on reconstruction. It's not just the United States that offers such support; the international community shares this vision and commitment and has provided important support. We look forward to all countries fulfilling the commitments made to Afghanistan's future.

The

Loya Jirga process last year showed Afghans want rule by ballots, not bullets. Despite many flaws, the eagerness of Afghans to participate in governance was palpable. People hiked for days to participate in district and regional Jirgas, at meetings held in conditions ranging from broiling sun to cold and mud.

My Afghan friends in the

audience can testify to the desire by ordinary Afghans to rise beyond the mistakes and tragedies of the past and to build a society where they and their children can be proud and peaceful participants. In the

process, the Afghan people can count, as they move forward, on the firm commitment of the United States and the American people. That commitment is reflected through the interests of the Americans, as those represented here today.

We, and the international community, will help, but it is up to the Afghan people to build for themselves a constitution and society that they are proud of. That shows the world that Afghanistan is not the oppression of the Taliban, not a place where rights are deprived and the economy goes backward, but a country that's ready to take its place alongside others, where children have opportunities to build a future - a place where people prosper and rights flourish.

Thank you very much.

[Applause.]

CHAIRPERSON GAER: The Ambassador has offered to take a few questions, and one of our Commissioners will lead that off.

Commissioner Tahir-Kheli, please.

COMMISSIONER

TAHIR-KHELI: Thank you very much. I think you have launched us very well this morning, giving us your rather unique perspective, as to the goals and expectations in this rather difficult journey that we have undertaken together.

I think that the commitment of the President and of the United States to Afghanistan's redevelopment is a very solid one and one that all of us don't question. By the same token, as we look at some of the issues that are the concern of this Commission, we look back to that history which you referred to in Afghanistan, which was a tolerant Afghanistan, with space for differences and divergences.

And recognizing the crucial nature of this commitment, I wonder if you would take a few minutes to at least illustratively tell us about sort of the new Afghanistan, with a concern for human rights and the rights of ethnic and religious

minorities, what has really gone right and what are you really very proud of having accomplished in this very important period, and what, if anything, has gone wrong, knowing, of course, that the U.S. will take the credit and the blame.

AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD: Thank you very much, Shirin. It's good to see you.

Of course, the situation in Afghanistan, in the course of the past year, has been a situation in transition. By definition, transition is a mixed situation, where there are things of the past and things of the future that are present together. With regard to the things that I am most pleased, most proud of that we have accomplished in the course of the past year that points to the future, I could point to many things, but two, in particular, come to mind.

One was my own participation in the opening of the school year on March 22nd in Afghanistan. I was very much moved personally by participating in several schools and their opening by the enthusiasm of little girls and boys with the slogan that "we want to learn" and to see that the United States of America, given my own background, had participated in facilitating that day. I think March 22nd was a very good day for Afghans, and I was very proud of that day.

Similarly, I was very proud, and very pleased, to be there, as I was, during the Loya Jirga. Now, the Bonn Agreement that laid the foundation for the political progress that Afghanistan is on the path of was as a result of an agreement among four groups.

The Loya Jirga I think was more representative than Bonn, but it was a stage, and I was very pleased and proud to see that the Afghans had stuck to the time schedule. The interim authority did not extend itself. As we have seen in many other countries, once you are in power, you do not make commitments. One cause of the conflict in the '90s was over this rotation that did not take place in time.

And I was very pleased that, despite all of the problems that the Loya Jirga, the process had, and again because of the nature of the situation, which is a transitional situation, the Loya Jirga was held; a woman candidate that I referred to and a President was elected.

I think, certainly, the biggest success was getting rid of the Taliban as the ruling authority in Afghanistan, but there are, of course, problems to be sure. Again, I would have liked, personally, and I know some of my colleagues know this is a hobby horse of mine. I would have liked a much faster development on the economic front, on the building of the security institutions.

But while we can argue--and given that I'm an academic by background, I might always enjoy a good argument--that could things have been done somewhat faster or slightly differently, but I think, fundamentally, I believe that we are on the right path, building security institutions, judicial institutions, economic progress in Afghanistan, both at the local level, rural development, reviving Afghanistan's agriculture, as well as other institutions necessary to make Afghanistan work for Afghans and stand on its own feet and to play a prudent transitional role in assisting ourselves with our forces and the forces of other countries.

As I said, this has been a good year, compared to the last previous 20 years or so in Afghanistan. I am, like many of my Afghan friends, impatient for more progress. We would like to see more progress at a more rapid pace. That's good. But let's not forget where we were only 14 months ago and how far we have come in this time period, and I am pleased very much myself with the distance that we have traveled, but I recognize that we have a long way to go.

CHAIRPERSON GAER: Thank you, Dr. Khalilzad.

AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD: Thank you very much. Thank you.